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When the body resembles a battlefield

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Dancers from Ultima Vez perform in *What The Body Does Not Remember* (1987), created by Wim Vandekeybus. Picture: Danny Willems
Source: Supplied

IN the modernist interior of Brussels' baroque Royal Flemish Theatre, two men are lying on a stage floor sliced with bars of light. A woman is sitting at a wooden desk behind them, as they jolt upwards, conducting their movements with a thrum of her fingers, a rap of her knuckles.

Three dancers balance on white breezeblocks that are thrown into the air and caught or neatly ducked. Other dancers career past each other, yanking off each other's clothes and brightly coloured towels and in a breath, changing into them. Women are frisked. Dancers get stomped on. Movement feels risky, instinctive. A spare recorded soundtrack by an electronica duo called Maximalist! underscores a sense of danger.

A sold-out audience is craning forward; in the front row of the balcony a child has climbed down from his father's knee and is staring intently at the stage through a gap under the balustrade. Not everyone is so present: a woman next to me lets her head drop then startles herself awake with a snore.

"Snoring? Haha." Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus is amused. "I suppose that for some people the show can be like a meditation."

What The Body Does Not Remember polarised audiences when it was first performed in Europe in 1987, the same year that it had its debut in Belgium in *Ancienne Belgique*, the cult concert venue in whose cafe Vandekeybus is sitting.

"In the 1980s I was obsessed with catastrophes and disasters," the 50-year-old says, his blue eyes twinkling. "I wanted to explore the intensity of those moments when you don't have a choice, like when you fall in love, or the way the body reacts a split second before an accident."

With his company *Ultima Vez*, Vandekeybus has gone on to redefine the medium of dance, borrowing from other disciplines - music, film and photography; text, circus and technology - to create almost 30 movement-based productions and numerous film and video works.

Music runs through his oeuvre like a silver thread; he has commissioned scores for his work from an array

of left-field composers and rock artists including David Byrne and Mark Ribot. While some productions have been music-led, others emphasise images, or text; classical mythology is also a motif. "I need the form to be different each time," he says. "The day I feel that I am busy doing something I've already done, I will stop."

Ultima Vez currently have six shows in repertory, including Oedipus/bet noir in which a cast of 16 reinterpret the tragic myth and Radical Wrong, a punkish theatre-dance fusion hinged on the theme of youth. Then there's booty Looting [sic] a show that references everyone from Medea to the German artist Joseph Beuys in its examination of postmodern plagiarism.

"We started creating the show by thinking about this modern day craving for images, about what it means to be photographed. This Medea kills her sons by putting their faces against the light bar of a photocopier."

Vandekeybus is disappointed that booty Looting won't be playing alongside What the Body Does Not Remember at the Adelaide Festival this week: "People in Australia are going to think that What The Body is all that we do, when we are now 26 years on." A pause. "But they will see the simplicity, the pureness."

Both shows are playing here in Brussels, topping and tailing the celebrations for the 25th anniversary of Ultima Vez. Tonight Vandekeybus is performing a short dance piece at Ancienne Belgique as part of four evening concerts by homegrown experimentalists with names like Dans Dans and The Black Heart Rebellion. "I'm hoping the music these artists make will inspire my work over the coming years," says Vandekeybus, whose dance intermezzos come with a live soundtrack by his friend, Belgian music star Mauro Pawlowski. "In my early years I couldn't afford to pay musicians to play live in my shows but I can now."

The early years were tough. Even when What the Body was awarded a Bessie, the prestigious New York dance and performance award (critics cited the "dangerous, combative landscape" created by the "brutal confrontation of movement and music"), Vandekeybus had to borrow money so he could fly to the US and accept it.

"We stayed up all night because we couldn't afford a hotel," says the man now widely acknowledged as one of Europe's top choreographers. "Then we flew straight back again; I was already so in debt I was nearly in jail."

He flashes a grin. While Ultima Vez now owns a large building in an up-and-coming Brussels municipality in which it variously rehearses, rents out to other performance companies and organises educational activities for a range of target groups, Vandekeybus has maintained the rebellious aesthetic that comes with growing up in the punk era. "Yes, I have," says the father of one, pleased. "Absolutely."

Ask him which artists are currently making work he admires and the list is boundary-pushing: Italian stage provocateur Romeo Castelluci; firebrand French choreographer Maud Le Pladac; and of course, Ultima Vez, the company he named after the Spanish phrase for "last time", hinting at the traits that would become the company's hallmarks: immediacy and energy.

Vandekeybus, who still dances in some of his productions, never set out to be a choreographer. The son of a vet, he was raised in Flanders, the Flemish region of Belgium, and studied psychology at university before getting sidetracked by performance.

In 1985 he auditioned for Belgian controversialist Jan Fabre and landed a role as a naked king in his production The Power of Theatrical Madness, which appeared at the Adelaide Festival the following year. "Laurie Anderson was there, and also [English post-punk band] the Fall and I remember we all went to a discotheque in Adelaide somewhere," he says.

Craving autonomy and a different direction ("With Jan Fabre, you finish each performance with a fifth of the audience left and the rest running out screaming at the end") he withdrew to Madrid for several months with a group of young dancers and set up Ultima Vez. There were people who didn't believe Vandekeybus could do it on his own.

But then he got the Bessie and two years later another one. The accolades have continued to pile up for shows that were originally filed under Flemish new wave, lumping them in with the work of such Belgian mavericks as Fabre, Anne Theresa De Keersmaker and Alain Platel.

"We all came from different genres and were not doing what we were supposed to do," he says. "We didn't get institutionalised and we didn't follow any rules. I still have the freedom to say I will make a piece and just see what happens. A guy from a big opera company just asked me to do an opera in 2015, and he wanted to know what it would be about!"

He looks astonished. "I would rather go on with making movies. I like the fact that a movie can be years in production."

Having spent five years writing the script for his feature film *Galloping Mind*, an English-Hungarian co-production about separated twins and gangs of kids on horseback (and nothing to do with dance whatsoever), he can't wait to get to Hungary to direct it.

That is, of course, after he has taken *What The Body* and its cast of nine to Adelaide. "The themes in the show are still relevant," he says. "I was looking at things like urban alienation, and the way nature is always indifferent to human passion. The drama is in the movement," he adds. "All this formed the basis of my language."

The time for chat is over. Vandekeybus looks at his watch. "Now if you'll excuse me," he says, unfolding himself with a smile, "I really must go and dance."

What The Body Does Not Remember, by Ultima Vez, is at the Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide, from tonight until March 10.